



Mareta L. Miller
This redhead writes ...by her own rules.

Enjoy this sampler of my books. It contains 2 chapters of each of my books with links if you want to read on. Hope you get hooked!
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*Telling Me With
Roses*

by

Mareta L. Miller

The
Ninety-Nine Roses Series

A box set of *Telling Me with Roses*, *Stemming From Secrets*, and *Blooming With Love*

Combined &

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Photographs by Alizabeth D. Kaminski

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1 rose signifies the moment I met you, I knew it was love at first sight.

3 roses, a way to say that I love you, when afraid the time wasn't right.

24 roses, the hours a day you should know that you're on my mind.

99 roses says "I'll love you forever," until the end of time.



Julia

I STIR FROM MY SLEEP as I hear rustling in the closet. As soon as he sees me moving he comes over to the bed, lying across it on his stomach, and kisses my neck, following the curve down to my bare chest. When he reaches my breast, he pauses and looks up at my face.

"Good morning, my beautiful wife."

He says something like this to me every morning, and it never gets old. I never tire of the many small terms of endearment he utters to me because they are not routine and meaningless, and each one is heartfelt and genuine.

"Good morning, babe. I don't want to get up." I drape my arm over my eyes in an act of denial and disobedience.

"Do you need my help getting up this morning?" As he says this, his hand drifts up my leg and settles between my thighs, not quite touching my opening but grazing its boundaries. In the end, I will, in fact, get out of bed but his question is less aimed at simply getting me up, but rather getting me off.

Glancing over at the clock, I look back at him. "We don't have long, Mr. Morreau."

"Mmmm, we don't need long, Mrs. Morreau," he says, as he takes my nipple in his mouth while he closes the final distance and drives his fingers inside me. "You are always so ready in the mornings, it's no wonder I love waking up to you every day."

A moan escapes me as he continues the motion with his finger. I never want to get up, and he knows this. But he also knows that after morning sex, there is no chance of me falling back to sleep. He's happy, I'm awake, and starting the day with an orgasm never hurt anyone.

He moves to where he's on top of me and wedges himself so that he's nestled between my legs. He kisses me deep even though I still have the taste of sleep in my mouth. I don't think I will ever tire of this and after almost ten years, just the thought of me naked still excites him. He pushes himself into me holding his mouth to mine. I think he loves the feel of me sucking his air in as I gasp upon his entry. After all this time, he still has the element of surprise when he first thrusts into me.

We fit together so perfectly, like the notes of a beautiful piece of music. So fluent and so effortless. We were made only for each other. Containing our lust is not a strong trait for either of us and after only a few minutes

we are both approaching our point of release. So in tune with each other's bodies, we climb together and finally—ecstasy. We explode together, feeling each other tremble with the force of our orgasms. He falls on top of me struggling for breath. I fight for my own below him.

“Are you awake now, my love?” He says while lifting himself up to take his weight onto his forearms.

“Yes, I am. Thank you very much for your wake-up services once again.” I kiss him on his nose and wiggle to get him to move off of me. He resists for a second but kisses me back on my nose and moves off the bed.

I sit up and check my phone and officially turn off the alarm. It's Friday, which always equates to a crazy-busy or better described as stressful-as-hell day for me. But this week has extra-added bonuses.

We have awesome plans for this weekend. Alex, the kids, and I are going camping. We call it camping when really it's going up to our friends' cabin and sleeping in our own tent, but it comes with all the staple camping activities. We get to hike, roast marshmallows, and tell scary stories. The main attraction is that it's out of the city and away from work, home, and studies for a couple of days. We would usually save this trip for the summer but with my schooling coming to an end, we thought it would be a nice finish to it all. My friend says snow is expected for the next few days, and the kids can't wait to go sledding and to build snowmen. This trip is going to be cold but then again, it's still only mid-January.

“Remember, today I need you to drop the kids off at school. I want to go in early to prepare for my last evaluation and interview. I'm going to drive in instead of taking the train today.” I can't believe that I'm almost done, that all this is becoming real. After this evaluation I'll have my degree, my internship will end, and my career will begin. I walk over and hug my still naked body to his now clothed one. “This is all happening because of you. You pushed me. You encouraged me to do what I loved, what I wanted.” I give him a grateful smile and kiss him.

“I will never be able to thank you enough but now, I need to get in the shower!” I turn to run for the bathroom, and he gives me a playful smack on the ass.

I hold up my finger, “Huh uh, Mr. Morreau. Later, you can officially nail the new editor at Miljone Publishing. But for now, you'll just have to fantasize about it.” I blow him a kiss and close the door, shaking my ass and knowing it's driving him crazy.

Since I'm not a long shower person, I emerge about twenty minutes later. Needing only to finish my hair and makeup, I go downstairs, towel still on my head, to make sure the kids are all put together for the day and to help if they're not. As I enter the kitchen, I see my three favorite people in the entire world and remind myself why I have worked so hard and what this final step today means for all of us. Walking over to the table, I step between Toby and Katie. Grabbing them both and squeezing them to me, I plant kisses on the top of their heads and head over to the breakfast bar to fill my coffee cup.

“And how are you two this morning? Homework in your bags, ready for spelling tests?” I get an affirmative head shake from Katie and nothing from Toby. “Katie, spell ‘together.’”

“Together. t-o-g-e-t-h-e-r. Together,” she smiles as she knows she is correct.

“Very good. Toby, spell ‘volcano.’”

“Volcano. v-a-l-c-a-n-o. Volcano.”

I come over to Toby and crouch down in front of him. “You have to remember, buddy, ‘volcano’ doesn't have an ‘a’ in the beginning, it's an ‘o,’ okay? You'll do great.” I stand and ruffle the hair on his head as I return to my coffee.

Toby and Katie are twins, and though inseparable most days, they couldn't be more different. Things are a little harder for him. He gets it; it just takes him a little longer. He has a mechanical mind, and he works better when things are hands-on. He can't just read about it, he has to do it. What's hard is reminding his sister that it is impolite to remind him that she gets things, especially things like spelling, quicker than he does. She's our book-smart child. She can read about anything and give you a full report in an hour. Oddly enough, and though I'm not a twin, I did the same thing to my brother. She is her mother's daughter, and Toby is his father's son.

After we were blessed with the two of them, we never thought of having more. I had a really hard pregnancy, and I wasn't advised to try it again. We had a son and a daughter, the perfect square. Top it off with a golden Labrador named Sam and a house in the suburbs. Our family was complete.

I head back upstairs to finish getting ready. I've picked out a gray pin skirt suit, a black blouse, and my nothing-but-business black pumps. When I stand back to look at myself in the mirror, the woman looking back at me is professional and confident. Dressed to kill, not a hair out of place, ready to kick ass and take names. "You have this Julia. It's all yours." One last smile at my reflection and I turn to leave the room.

"Okay, everybody, I'm off. Wish me luck. Today means a lot to all of us. Toby, 'volcano' with an 'o' got it?" I chug down the last of my coffee and set my cup in the sink.

"Got it, mom, 'o,'" and he gives me a thumbs-up.

"Katie, remember to be polite, got it?"

"Got it, mom. Good luck on your interview today."

I step back over to the table giving each one of my loves a kiss and hug, ending with Alex, who I always kiss as though it's the last time I'll have that chance. I grab my briefcase, my purse, and my coat and head out the door. When I get to the car, I realize I've forgotten my keys, but then I hear the footsteps of the man I love coming my way.

"Did you plan on getting far without these?" he asks as he dangles the keys from his finger.

"I'm just nervous. On the outside, you'd never know, but in here," I tap the side of my head, "I'm freaking out. I know it will go great. I know what I'm doing. It's just that I've—we've—sacrificed so much, this means so much. What if I don't get it? I just need this to be over. I need to—"

"Believe in yourself," he finishes the phrase for me. He knows me better than I know myself.

"I love you." It's as simple as that. There's no need to recite Shakespeare, to compare what we have to the size of the universe, or to use big words to describe how we feel. I love you, just three little words.

"I love you, babe. I'll be right there with you, right here," he places his hand on my chest, right over my heart. "Now get out of here, or you'll have no time. And not to mention my hand is dangerously close to your tits right now. I could derail both of us."

"Sure, throw out an offer you know I can't accept. Tease!"

"Whatever! I couldn't sway you for anything right now." I just smile because for the first time maybe ever, I'm choosing something else over sex with my husband. "Celebration dinner tonight! Lobster, wine, anything for my woman."

Then one last kiss, that lingers on my lips after we've pulled apart. I get in the car placing all my things on the passenger seat, start the car, and back out of the driveway.



Julia

MOST AREAS OF MY FINAL evaluation have been presented in the form of work assignments over the last few weeks. They were generally proofreads for real pieces of work our company has been hired to edit and publish. When I first started my internship, I would get the same types of work but it was on a check and recheck basis so that I could learn from my mistakes and prove my worthiness. Now my future depends on it and from here on out any mistake that leaves my desk could be for the world to see and for my reputation and the company's to be left tarnished.

My final evaluation is, from what I hear, more of an interview, a recap of my triumphs and failures. Knowing that doesn't stop me from trying to go over all the things I've learned during my internship. I figure it's typical of them to throw a couple of fastball questions and expect a quick catch under pressure. After all, this profession is constantly under the pressure of deadlines and governed by high expectations.

The most important thing is that the decision made today will also define the completion of my degree. To be hired from the intern program would mean everything to me. Alex encouraged me, actually pushed me to go back to school after the twins were born. It was hard, and it moved slowly, only being able to go part-time. It took too much of my time away from my family. So hopefully this day will mean the beginning of something better for all of us.

I get to the conference room ten minutes early. I can only hope that on the outside, I look as confident and kept together as my reflection showed this morning because, on the inside, I think I just might pass out. Suddenly I feel as if I'm going to be sick. I know it's just anxiety. Deep breaths, in and out. I'm going to be fine. I put my hand on my chest and feel what Alex told me earlier, he's with me, right here. The door to the conference room opens, and the editor in chief, Frank Lawson, steps into the doorway.

"Ms. Morreau, would you please come in." He's a very nice man. He's been a mentor for me these last few months. I don't find him intimidating usually, but I know he holds some weight in today's decision. I just hope that I've impressed him enough up to this point.

With a file in his hand, he uses it to point to the large table surrounded by ten chairs, six of which are filled with people that I haven't yet met.

"Please have a seat, Ms. Morreau."

"Yes, sir, thank you."

I take a seat at the front of the table across from the now seven occupied chairs. My stomach continues to knot, but I will get through this. I've worked too hard to mess this up now. I take a deep breath and try to focus on the people seated before me.

Frank introduces the people before me. Basically, they are the board members and investors that profit greatly from the work done here. Though I see their presence as unnecessary, I'm sure that with their financial interests, they insist on being present.

"Ms. Morreau, we have found your time here at Miljone Publishing to be very advantageous. For example, you have proven yourself through the multiple tasks you have been given, completing each within your time constraints. You carry an almost nonexistent error rate and have gained the respect of nearly all of our senior editors. You're very impressive. Have you enjoyed your position here, Ms. Morreau?"

"Yes, I have. Very much. For so long, too long really, this is what I've wanted to do."

"You know that you are only one of five interns we took in this year. You've ranked top five in your class and were highly recommended for this internship. We only have room for one editor on our team and in the past, on occasion, we have elected not to keep anyone from the

internship program. After all, grades and good work are only part of a winning combination. We are looking for the best, Ms. Morreau. A person who can hit the ground running, be trustworthy, punctual with deadlines, respectful of the clients, and thorough in their work at all times. That requires passion as well.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you think you possess these qualities and can bear the responsibilities that accompany a position here at Miljone?”

“Yes, sir, I do. I hope that I have proved that in my time here.” The knots in my stomach are nearly unbearable now. Please let this end soon. I don’t believe I’ve ever stressed myself to a point of pain of this magnitude.

“Indeed you have, Ms. Morreau. That’s why it is a pleasure for me and my colleagues to offer you a position here at Miljone Publishing.” All the faces in the room turn from serious business to smiles, and I’m sure mine does the same.

“From this moment on you are no longer an intern, you are an editor and the newest official member of our team.” It takes all I have to contain myself. I want to scream and jump around acting like someone who just hit a jackpot. I want to give every one of them a hug, and I’m not one of those huggy people. But in an attempt to remain professional, I simply plaster a smile on my face.

“Thank you, Mr. Lawson, and all of you as well. I will not disappoint you.” I stand and move around the table to shake each of their hands. I thank each one because I know this decision had to have received their approval. Even though they know nothing more than what they’ve been told, if it weren’t for each of them I wouldn’t be here now.

After they have all made their way out of the room, Mr. Lawson approaches me. “Well done, Julia. I knew you would be the one this time, from the moment I finished your first proofread. Now I want you to go down to personnel and get all your paperwork done. Then I want you to go home for the day, celebrate with your family, and we will see you at eight o’clock Monday morning.”

“Thank you again, Mr. Lawson. I can’t thank you enough. I won’t let you down, I promise.”

“I’m sure you won’t, you’ve worked too hard for it. Now, get your paperwork done and get out of here. See you Monday. And from here on out, call me Frank.” He turns and walks away, headed in the direction of his office.

My stomach hasn’t let up, so him giving me the rest of the day off was a blessing. I hurry to personnel so that I can call Alex and give him this amazing news, although he won’t be surprised. He knew I had this.

On the way home I dial Alex three times and each time it goes directly to voicemail. This is odd, he never turns his phone off. Since I’ve been interning he was the best contact for the kids. He has the flexibility to answer his calls when I don’t.

I call his office number and get Lindsay, his receptionist. “Good morning, Lindsay. It’s Julia, can I speak to Alex, please?”

“I’m sorry, Julia, but he never came in today.” There is an odd hesitation in her voice like she’s delivering troublesome news.

A stab of pain shoots through my stomach making me cringe so hard that I almost lose control of the car. I pull over to the side of the road, holding my abdomen and feeling light-headed.

“What do you mean, he never came in? Did he call? Did he have business out of the office this morning that maybe you’ve forgotten?” I know I’m starting to sound frantic, maybe even psychotic. I just keep firing off questions without giving her a chance to answer.

“He just never came in, I don’t know. It’s not like him at all not to call. I’m sorry, but I don’t know what else to say, Julia. I’ll let him know you’re trying to reach him if he shows up.” I can hear the atonement in her voice.

“Ok, thank you.” It’s all I can manage, and I hang up.

I know that Alex is not screwing around behind my back. That is never a concern. But where is he and why isn’t he answering his phone? And why won’t this pain go away?

I decide to go home, maybe he’s there. Maybe one of the kids got sick, and he’s there with them. Maybe he didn’t call because of my meeting. I’m sure that’s it, he’s got to be at home. But why didn’t he call work? I pull up in the drive, and his car is not there. What is going on? I get out of the car and head to the house. I run from room to room throwing open doors. “Alex! Toby! Katie! Is anyone here?” Nothing. No one.

Only Sam runs up to greet me. I’m starting to panic now. The pain is getting worse. I get to the couch and sit. I try to take deep breaths with my head between my knees, but they all come up too short. My vision fades and blurs. I’m going to pass out. That’s my last conscious thought.

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Banging. I hear banging followed by Sam’s barking. I come to, and I’m confused. I’m at home. Why? I look around, disoriented, trying to recall what happened. The pain in my stomach has dulled but is still there. Again, the banging. I realize there’s someone at the door. I try to right myself and stand. I’m a little unsteady, but I can get to the door. I push Sam back, and I open it to find two officers. The pain quickly intensifies. Why are they here? Where. Is. Alex?

“Mrs. Morreau?” one of them, a female, finally says.

“Yes, officer. Can I help you?”

“Are you Julia Morreau?” I nod. “May we step inside for a moment, Mrs. Morreau?” the other asks. He’s a hard-looking older man, nothing but business.

“Of course, come in. Is something the matter, something I can help you with? I’m really not feeling very well.” My words come out light as a feather, my breath short again. I know now that something is wrong, very wrong.

I motion for them to sit, and they ask me to sit as well. This is not good. Where is the air dammit? I. Can’t. Breathe.

“We have some news, Mrs. Morreau. There was an accident,” the male officer says. He’s very straight and to the point, showing no reserve and no sympathy.

My breath catches and I lift my hand to my mouth. There is only one reason they come to your house to tell you things like this. Tears start to fill my eyes, so I look down, but nod for them to continue.

“There was no time to save them.” The female says in a much softer tone.

I stop listening. Them. More than one. The most precious people in my life are gone. I’m pulled back by the sound of the officer saying my name more loudly than before. He’s trying to bring me back to a place I’d rather not be. Again I nod.

“My daughter? My son? My husband?” Each question is a whisper giving them no time to answer.

“All of them, Mrs. Morreau. I’m sorry.” He’s softer now, the rough authority having left his tone. I can now hear pain in his voice. The regret of having to be the one delivering this news. I shouldn’t be mad at him, but I am. I want to hate him for being the one to tell me this.

I jump from the couch and run, stumbling down the hall to the bathroom where I expel the contents of my stomach.

I slam my hands on the sides of the toilet seat as I kneel in front of it. “NO! NO! This isn’t happening! The kids are taking their spelling test right now. Toby is spelling volcano with an ‘o.’ He’s spelling it right! And Katie, she’s going to ace it like she always does. She’s so damn smart like her father. And Alex, he’s not at work because he’s planning a special dinner to celebrate. He knew I would get the job. He’s out buying flowers and a nice bottle of wine. He said we would have lobster! This is all wrong! It’s not my family!” I am saying all of this aloud, but to myself as the tears cloud my vision. I’m working it out so that I can tell them there must be some mistake. I look up to see the female officer standing at the bathroom door. I look into her eyes and plead with her silently. “Please tell me this is a mistake, please. Tell me you’re wrong. It’s not them.”

She looks back at me with as much sadness and sympathy as she’s allowed to show. And when she speaks to me her voice is low and soft like a mother’s when she’s trying to soothe a child.

“I’m sorry. There is no mistake, Mrs. Morreau. Is there someone you can call? Any family that can come be with you now? I don’t want to leave you here alone.”

I nod yes, but the answer is no. There’s no one I want here. No one that can help me understand. No one that can change what’s happened. We were all the family each other had. Now I’m alone, and my heart has just been ripped out.

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Wes

Three months ago ...

Three and a half years in the Colorado Department of Corrections and the only thing of value I've learned is to fight. *Fighting*—something I used to avoid at all costs. In fact, I aided others in finding other solutions to their problems, but in there it was about survival and only the fighters survived. There was no compromise—fight or die. I never felt like I didn't belong there. The only thing I felt I deserved more, was to die, but that didn't happen and I'd be damned if that revelation was going to be brought to light by one of those convicts. The judge had wanted to make an example of me, handing me the longest sentence he could for the crime I committed. A crime almost any of us could have easily executed without purpose. But it wasn't enough that I bear the weight of blame on my chest with every single breath I take. It wasn't enough for him and it isn't enough for me. A life sentence in that hole wouldn't have been long enough for me. I wanted and deserved death.

Of course, they could smell me walking through the door—fresh white-collar meat; I was practically a delicacy served to them on a silver platter. On the inside, it's all fucked up. It's beat or be beaten, kill or be killed. I'll agree that I deserved my sentence, but I sure as hell didn't deserve what I got—being gang raped by a pack of psychotic criminals that hurt people for fun and without remorse. The kind that had nothing to lose because seeing freedom through the light of day was a thought lost long ago. It had only happened that one time and I swore it would never happen again. I would fight, I would become unstoppable, and I would kick the shit out those three cowards and anyone else that came along. I would get my ultimate castigation one day, but it wouldn't be in there. Fighting was how I made it through, how I gained respect, and how I got out of that hole in one piece.

One thousand two hundred seventy-eight and a half days I spent behind those walls. Biding my time between the gym and the library, reaching and maintaining my place near the top of the food chain. Making no friends but keeping acquaintances with an even higher social status. An incident like that night would never happen to me again.

The night before your release is treated no different than any other. You are not free until your feet hit the gravel outside the second fence. That night reality hit me once again. I'd had nightmares every night, reliving the event that changed everything and I knew that when I got out of there I wouldn't get anything back, it's gone. Every last detail of my perfect life erased.

I wouldn't wake up in the mornings and go to my office because I wasn't a doctor anymore. I wouldn't wake up to the woman I love because I didn't have a fiancée anymore. There would be no wedding, no honeymoon, and no babies that would have her smile. After I got out of there, I had no reason to care anymore, and even less reasons to live.

On my last night in that cell, my cellmate Duke handed me a piece of paper with a name and number on it. "Here, kid. If you find yourself in a tough spot needing money or just feel the need to kick the shit out of someone." That was all he said. I stuck the paper in my pocket. That piece of paper and a set of donated clothes were all I walked out of there with, which was already more than I deserved.

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Now ...

I wake up in a strange place, a room filled with hollowness. I can make out lights and sounds but everything is a complete blur. I hear beeping, the sound of shoes squeaking against a clean floor, and voices. Many different voices, voices that aren't familiar to me. I reach out to my side to find that my arm is tethered by tubes and I'm trapped by a metal railing. I'm in a hospital.

I don't know why I'm here and I can't remember anything from the night before. I haven't had a fight in a week and that fight, I won. So why am I here? My head's an aching mess and my thinking is unclear. It seems that with every effort I make to clear the fog, the ache grows stronger.

I won't allow myself to panic—I never do and that's partly why I'm so good at what I do. I need to think though; I need to remember. I close my eyes, concentrating to keep my breathing even. I see her eyes and I can hear her voice, "*Stay with me,*" she says. I can feel the pressure of her touch on my abdomen and reach down to where her hand had been. I wince with pain. I've been hurt.

Someone walks into the room and comes to stop at my bedside. "Look who's awake. How are you feeling, Mr. Draves?" A nurse, of course. Her demeanor is a little too uplifting for how I'm feeling but better than some hard-ass that secretly hates her job.

“Honestly, I feel like I was hit by a truck but something tells me that’s not quite what happened.”

“Well your cognitive thinking is functioning well. You were not hit by a truck but you were beat up pretty badly and stabbed.”

Beat up? Stabbed? I don’t remember any of that. I don’t get beat up, I serve up the beatings. “Do they know who did this to me?”

“Well, with you having been unconscious, the police haven’t been able to get very far. Maybe now that you’re awake you can shed some light.” She’s checking machines and writing down things on a clipboard, then checks the IVs inserted into my right arm. I now notice that my left arm is restrained by a cast.

“I don’t remember anything from last night.”

“Last night? Hon, you’ve been in here for almost six days.”

“Six days!”

“Yup, six days. Now that you’re awake, is there anyone we can call for you?”

“Has anyone been here looking for me?”

“Not that I know of. Oh, wait, there was this one really sweet girl trying to get in to see you.”

“A girl? Did she say who she was?”

The nurse, who I’ve yet to know her name, giggles. “She didn’t even know your name, so we couldn’t let her see you or give her any information. But she was the one that found you that night and called the paramedics and was somehow able to ride with you in the ambulance.” She shakes her head disapprovingly. “I felt bad though, she was so worried about you, so I told her that you were alive and that you would be fine.”

“But did she say who she was?” Are the eyes that I see when I close mine hers? Is she the one that robbed me of peace?

“No, she didn’t, but I’m sure the police have her information if you really want it. Now, just rest and I’ll send the doctor in soon and we can see where we’re at. You may be able to get out of here in a couple of days.” She walks out with her clipboard, pulling the door closed behind her.

“Couple of days my ass. I need to figure out what the hell happened and get the hell out of here as soon as possible.” I huff aloud to myself.

The doctor comes in and after looking at my chart, shining bright lights into my eyes, and checking my sutures, he says that he wants me under observation for two more days before he’ll sign my release. My memory loss is only a small concern and it’s likely that it’ll return sooner than later because the injuries to my head were pretty minimal, considering the disarray the rest of my body was left in. Stabbed in the stomach, a few broken ribs, a broken arm, and bruising nearly everywhere. Whoever did this wasn’t just out looking to pull off a textbook mugging. They were out to kill.

The title 'Chapter 1' is written in a black, elegant cursive font. It is flanked by two stylized wings. The wing on the left is blue with black outlines, while the wing on the right is black with black outlines. Both wings have a soft, feathered appearance.

# Chapter 1

A large, light gray watermark reading 'MLM PUBLISHER' is oriented diagonally across the page, from the bottom left to the top right.

## Reanne

Six days ago ...

I finally have everything cleaned up and prepped for the morning service. Sundays are my busiest days so Saturdays are my busiest nights. It's a routine though and I find comfort in routines. And because I don't have a life outside my bakery, spending *date* night in the solitude of my sweet sanctuary is really perfect. I sent Molly, my roommate, best friend, and employee, up to the apartment we live in above my shop about an hour or so ago. She looked so exhausted. It's been a long day and she opens with me tomorrow. Four o'clock comes real early.

It's about nine at night and it's dark outside but I still need to take Sugar for a walk. I lock up and go the two hundred feet from the front door of my bakery to the door that takes me up to my apartment. Once I've entered the stairwell I can hear that she's taken full advantage of my absence. I enter the apartment, barely able to hear anything over the music blaring. It's a song that I like so it's easy to fall into the melody as I walk in and close the door behind me. I am quickly noticed and greeted by my very excited white Pomeranian named Sugar, for obvious reasons.

I scoop up the cute little ball of fur and give her a scratching and kisses as I dance through the apartment in search of my *energy-apparently-regained* roommate. I find her in the kitchen preparing a small tray of grapes, cheeses, and sliced salami. Not too far from that is a bottle of merlot and two glasses.

She hasn't seen me yet so I sneak up behind her and raise my voice so she'll hear me over the music. "Expecting someone?"

"Oh, hey!" She turns and leans her ear closer to me. "What?"

I motion to the spread of food and wine and ask again. "Expecting someone?"

“Yup! You!” She picks up the remote and lowers the volume so we don’t have to yell our conversation any longer.

“Me? To what do I owe this well-prepared feast?”

“Well, if I must remind you—it was ten months ago today that you let me move in. You gave me a job and you trusted me. You saved me, Rea. So I thought that since neither of us had been on a real date in a while, I’d prepare a small token of my thanks. A little girlfriend date.”

I cross the space between us and pull her into a hug. “Of course I didn’t forget, sweetie.” I didn’t forget, really I didn’t. I’m just not one for celebrating anniversaries. Besides the opening of my bakery and the time Molly’s been with me, I’ve never had a good anniversary to celebrate, so I stopped. I found no sense in reminding myself yearly, or in this case monthly, of the bad things in my life.

“This really is awesome of you. I need to take Sugar for a quick walk and then we’ll celebrate, okay?” I grab Sugar’s leash off the hook by the door and clip it to her collar.

“Yay! You want to watch a movie too?”

“Sure, you pick it. I’ll be back in a few.” I’m out the door and quickly go down the stairs to the door that leads us out onto the sidewalk.

This area is pretty quiet this time of night and is always nice to walk around. I take a left out the door and head down Zuni so that I can make another left on Thirty-Third and circle around. There is no one out as I walk through the neighborhood and all I can see are living room lights and the illumination of televisions through drawn curtains. This works to my advantage because Sugar has nothing to bark at but our own shadows.

As I come down Thirty-Second Street nearing the corner where my shop is, I hear something coming from the alley to the right, behind the pizzeria. I pick up Sugar to try to keep her quiet, knowing she’s going to go off any second. My effort fails and, as anticipated, she goes off like a bomb—uncontrollable yapping from a dog that has very little capability of actually protecting me if it were actually necessary.

Her noise has already made whoever it is aware of our presence and a few seconds later, two figures run out of the alley and down Thirty-Second in the opposite direction. Thankful for their fleeing and the fact that I was hidden in a spot that was not well lit, I take a couple of deep breaths and try to calm my heart that is nearly beating out of my chest. More than likely they would think the dog was in one of the yards across the street and would never have realized I was even here—I can only hope, anyway.

As I set Sugar down to finish the short distance back to the safety of our apartment and the solace of a glass of wine, I hear something coming from the alley. It sounds like someone in pain. There’s moaning and it sounds horrible and desperate. My adrenaline kicks in and I start moving toward the alley without thinking, and taking out my phone to call Molly as I walk.

“Are you standing me up? Is this a dear Molly call?” She sounds sassy as she jokes with me, but now is not the time.

“No, Moll. Listen, I need you to come get Sugar, right now!”

“Rea! What’s going on?” Her joking tone is no longer and worry sets into her voice.

“Please, just get down here! I’m in the alley behind the pizzeria!” I hang up because there’s no time for more questions.

I walk up on a figure lying crumpled and bloody on the ground. By the looks of how badly he’s beaten, whoever did this was driven but, lucky for him, was interrupted by my pint-sized alarm. I pull out my phone again to call for an ambulance. The light from the screen is bright enough for me to see that not only has this man been beaten but there is a wound in his

abdomen with a fresh stream of blood coming from it and filling his shirt, leaving a large crimson circle.

Molly comes up from behind me, screaming my name. “Rea! What happened? What’s going on?”

The operator answers. “911. What’s your emergency?”

Somehow in this moment I find clarity and know that I can’t help save him if I don’t focus. “A man has been beaten and stabbed. We’re in the alley behind the pizzeria on Thirty-Second and Zuni.”

“Do you know the name of the victim, ma’am?”

“No. I was walking by and heard him.”

“Units are on their way, ma’am. You need to apply pressure to the stab wound, a jacket or something. Please stay on the phone until units arrive. Please do not disconnect until they arrive.”

“Yes, of course.” I take my hand to cover the microphone on my phone. In a calm low voice, I make eye contact with Molly. “Molly, listen to me.” She nods. “Take Sugar. Go to the apartment. I’ll be there soon. Everything will be okay. Now go.” She looks at me questioningly and scared but does as I’ve told her.

My focus is returned to the broken man before me. I remove my sweater and press it to his abdomen. He winces with the pressure and I’m afraid that I’m hurting him, but I know it has to be done. With the operator still on the line, I try to make eye contact with him. His eyes lock on mine and I see so many emotions in those glossed-over eyes. Fear, anger, relief, and question.

“Stay with me, okay? Help is coming. Focus on me, just keep your eyes on me and listen to my voice.” My voice is calm and somehow I’m able to mask the trembling I feel. I can’t let him see the same fear in my eyes that I see in his.

“Go ... please ... let me die.” He speaks and I’m instantly saddened because those are not the words I thought I’d hear. They’re sad and begging.

“You’re not going to die tonight. Just hold on. Stay with me. Help is almost here. Just hold on to my eyes. Fight, for me, if not for yourself. Just a few minutes longer.” I can hear the sirens and relief floods me.

“Do you hear that? Hold on just a minute more. They’re coming.”

I’d almost forgotten about the operator on the line. “Ma’am, services should be arriving in less than a minute.”

“I hear them.”

The ambulance pulls up and I’m moved out of the way so they can begin procedures. Assessing his injuries and tending to them in order to stabilize him for transport. Lifting his body onto the gurney, they roll him toward the ambulance and I see something fall from his body. No one has noticed it, so I swoop down to retrieve it. It’s his phone and I thoughtlessly slip it into my pants pocket. I watch on as everyone does their jobs and figuring that my time here is done, I walk to the alley entryway, prepared to go home and explain everything to Molly and then try to sleep with the visions of this night fresh in my mind, but one of the paramedics stops me.

“Ma’am, are you going to ride with him to the hospital?”

Without a second thought I nod my head, “Yes.”

“Okay, get in. We’re ready to head out.”

I step into the back of the ambulance and settle in next to him. His eyes are closed as the medications they’ve administered take effect, but I take his hand anyway and start to whisper to

him. “I don’t know you, but you’re going to stay with me. Hold on a little while longer, we’re almost there and you’re going to be fine. I promise you.”

The sirens are so loud they’re almost deafening but I don’t hear them at all. All I can hear are my pleas for this man that I don’t know, to hold on. As we pull up to the hospital, the number of people attending to him doubles immediately and I try to follow them but I’m finally lost in the crowd of people focused on saving him. One woman emerges from the mass and pulls me aside to ask me questions.

“Ma’am, what is the victim’s name? Are you family?”

I hesitate because I know the answer to these questions will ban me from any further contact or information about him, but in the end I have to admit that I know nothing more about him than that I found him lying in an alley fighting for his life. “I don’t know his name and I’m not family. I found him like this and I called for help. That’s all I can tell you.”

I can see some compassion in her eyes but that doesn’t change what she’s about to tell me. “You know that means that this is as far as I can let you go?” I nod in affirmation. “I’m sure the officers have some questions for you, though.” She gestures to the two standing by the door.

“Of course. Thank you.” I nod and turn toward them knowing I’m about to relive every detail of this night, but will have no clue how the man is doing or if he’ll even survive.

By eleven o’clock I’m finally walking into my apartment. Thankfully one of the officers gave me a ride back. Blood stains my clothes and I’m missing my sweater which was likely thrown away with the other biohazard trash. I’m tired but feeling that a part of me was left with a man that I don’t even know. I promised him he’d live, even after he asked me to let him die and I know there’s a reason our paths crossed tonight, but sadly, I’ve no clue if they’re ever meant to cross again.

All I want right now is a shower and my bed, but as I take off my clothes, leaving them in a heap on the tile floor, something falls out of my pocket. It’s his phone.

## Wes

For four years now, I’ve had the nightmares—every night, the same subconscious reminders of the night that changed my life. The only break I’ve had from them was the six days I spent blissfully comatose after my attack. Now, under the influence of a steady drip of narcotics meant to ease the physical pain, the dreams, or rather reruns of the past, are more vivid than ever.

*I had the night planned to the very last detail. A romantic dinner at the same place we first met.*

*Nothing in my life had gone any more perfect than the day I met my Kat. I was encouraged by my mother to attend one of the cooking classes hosted at the country club. She’d say, “You pay enough for that place, Wesley. Maybe you’ll meet a woman at a cooking class, that wouldn’t be a bad deal. After all, you’ll know she can cook.”*

*So, I gave it a try and signed up to learn how to cook chicken parmesan. I am by no means a cook and Kat noticed this as I made a total mess out of my white shirt while making my marinara sauce. She came to my rescue, saving my dish and suggesting that the best thing for the shirt was a trash can and a replacement. Then she introduced herself and I was a goner.*

*“Hi. I’m Kat, short for Katherine, but please call me Kat.” She laughed as she held her hand out. I took it and brought it to my lips.*

*“Wesley Draves. Nice to meet you, Kat.”*

*“Who wears a white shirt to an Italian cooking class?” she asked laughingly while we sat at the bar in the lounge after the class.*

*“A guy that didn’t quite realize how big of a klutz he was until tonight. A guy that was hoping the most beautiful girl in the class would see this flaw as a charming, yet hopeless attempt to not have to cook this beautiful girl a dinner, but perhaps, instead, to accept an invitation to a dinner out sometime.”*

*“If it’ll keep you out of a kitchen, unsupervised, I think that guy had a good plan.”*

*A year later, and many cooking classes where she insisted it was safer if we worked as a team, I was completely smitten and ready to ask her to marry me. I knew that she was the only woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with and I couldn’t wait another moment to tell her that.*

*It was cool out but I had a table set up on the patio of the restaurant along the pond. Lit candles and the moon’s reflection bouncing off the water were the perfect backdrop for a perfect night.*

*She sat across from me and I’m sure she knew all throughout dinner what my plan was but she waited patiently. I had an entire speech ready. I was going to tell her how special she was, how much I loved her, and that I would always love her and take care of her for the rest of our lives, but that speech didn’t happen. When it came down to it, all of those words would take too much time, minutes more than I could wait to hear her answer. I took the ring from my pocket and with it in one hand and taking her hand in my other, I wasted no more time.*

*“Katherine, be my wife.” It’s the only time I’d ever called her by her full name and I wasn’t asking her a question. I was making a subtle demand. Because to ask would indicate the question is one I didn’t already know the answer to. In this case I knew with all certainty what her answer would be.*

*Her response was just as subtle. “I thought you’d never ask.”*

*I slipped the one carat princess cut solitaire on her finger and kissed it as I sealed it in place, then I rose from my seat to circle the table and pulled her into my arms.*

*“I love you, Kat. My heart is forever yours. You’ve made me so happy and I know you will for the rest of my life.” Kissing her hard, I hoped that she could feel my every emotion and everything else that my impromptu speech didn’t say.*

*We stood there on the patio, leaning against the railing and staring out over the water. We held each other, drank wine, and shared our dreams for the future. We spoke of children, trips together, and our happily ever after. Everything was perfect.*

*Driving home that night, the sexual energy between us was distinct. A bottle of fine wine enjoyed and the excitement of the evening building to a level of agony, we both were in need of release. I wanted to make love to my fiancée in the worst way. I imagined taking every part of her body, claiming it, and marking it as mine—mine forever.*

*Blinded by thoughts of the evening to be had, I never saw it coming. Suddenly there was the squealing of tires as I pressed as hard as I could on the brakes, gripping the steering with white-knuckled ferocity. Then the car was flipping over and over, and I lost all sense of direction. When we finally stopped, I was left shaken and nearly unconscious, but my only thought was to make sure she was all right. I reached for her but couldn’t stretch far enough. I called for her but my loudest scream came out as a raspy whisper because of the air being knocked out of my lungs. She didn’t move and she didn’t cry out for help. I couldn’t reach her*

*but I could see her and I knew. I knew that on the same night she promised me the rest of her life, her life ended and I only wished I had been so lucky.*

I wake with a jolt, the machines blaring with alarm. The nurse runs into the room and straight to the monitor keeping track of my heartbeat. Over the years I've learned to keep my nightmares to myself because they are a sign of weakness. But in here, hooked up to all these machines, I can only hide what's in my mind, the reaction my body has is not as easy. The nurse looks to me for an explanation.

"Nightmare." It's all I say. She doesn't want nor need details.

"After what you've been through, I'm not surprised. Do you want me to see if I can get you something to help you sleep?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Okay. Call me if you need anything." Closing the door, she's gone, leaving me again to my darkness.

The next time I doze off, it's not *Kat's* lifeless body I see. I see eyes. The eyes of the woman that begged me to stay with her, to hold on. I hear her voice. "*You're not going to die tonight. Hold my eyes. I don't know you, but you're going to stay with me.*" Why did she steal my peace from me? The closest I've been to being able to let go in four years and she robbed me of it. I wanted to die and was happy someone had finally been able to do the job. Why did she have to be there? I could've finally been back with the love of my life, not living in hell every day without her.

Did I leave you hanging?

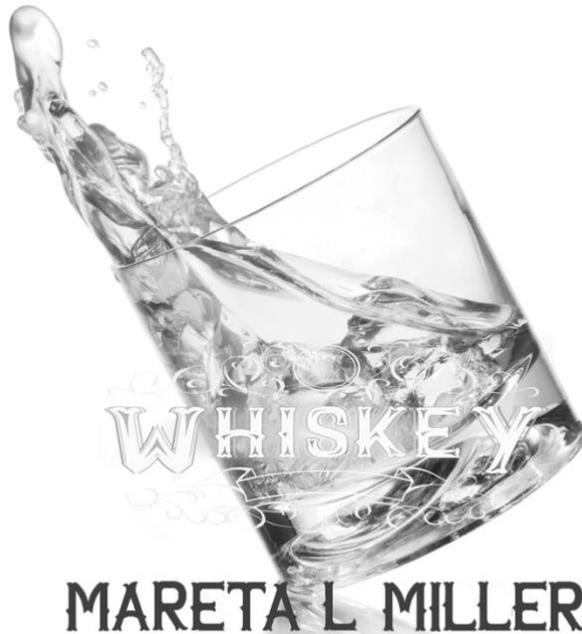
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Dedicated to Marcia and Ruth

Gone from this earth, but forever with me.

Whiskey

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I run into the bar, nearly late for my shift, and hoping that I can sneak in without Jonas catching me. If I have to listen to his lecture about punctuality one more time, I may just puke. I've never been punctual a day in my life. I was late for my own birth and for almost everything since, so why start now? When I am on time, it's by the skin of my teeth, and contrary to the saying, your teeth don't have actual skin. Even with my best efforts, time just never seems to be on my side.

I slip in behind the bar, and fortunately, one of my regulars is sitting at the end. I grab a beer and a glass and head his way, acting as though nothing is amiss.

"How's it going, Jim?"

"Damn good, now that you're here. How's my favorite bar girl tonight?"

"Better, now that I'm still your favorite bar girl." Then I lean in to whisper, "Though your options are few." I give him a little wink and he laughs. "I'll be back in a minute." I turn around and crash into a wall, or at least it feels like a wall—the wall of Jonas.

"Cutting it close tonight."

"Jonas, don't start with me. I'm here aren't I? I caught every damn light possible. I can't control the lights." I throw my hands up as I back away to move around him. The truth is I left late. *Late* should be my middle name. It's actually only six lights, but he doesn't need to know that. I can walk here, I'm that close, but I don't get off until two and I'd prefer not to.

“Then leave earlier. You know you’re a little new here to be so cocky. It’s a good thing you’re an awesome bartender.”

“It’s a good thing you think I’m an awesome bartender.” I smile at him and wait for his stern bossy look to crack, as I know it will. When it does, the corners of his mouth curve up and his pearly whites shine through. He just can’t help it and I know it.

“Get to work!” He tries to pass it off as an alpha male order and I allow him that courtesy.

“You got it, boss!” I walk through the door that connects the two bars and smile. I love Saturday nights. I move quickly to start stocking my bar with anything and everything that someone having a night out would think to ask for. I only have two hours to get ready, but if you ask me, it’s the hardest I’ll work all night.

You see, tonight is karaoke, which means I get to work my own somewhat private bar in the back room and I’ll make a killing in tips. But the real fun is listening to the performers and watching them lose themselves in their songs. Some people, okay a lot of people, just like to get up there and make fools of themselves. Many are too drunk to even read the words, but there are a few that are really good and you can tell that they wait all week for their three minutes on stage. Truth be told, I’m one of those people.

If you had asked me before I started here to stand up in front of people and sing, you’d get a big fat no and I’d probably give you the bird too, but after a couple of months with this crowd, and getting caught singing along on multiple occasions, a bar-wide campaign was launched to get me up there. I would’ve never believed or understood how liberating one song could be, or how I’d crave the feeling again, but what I think makes it even better, is that these people spend weekend after weekend here with me, so they’re not just my customers, they are my friends.

I look around, satisfied that I’ve covered everything, so there’s only one thing left to do. I walk over and pick up the whiteboard sign. A permanent heading across the top reads, *Your bartender for the night*, but my writing from the week before is rubbed off and worn. I use the eraser to give myself a fresh, clean canvas, then grab the red marker. When I’m done, the space below, in flared red ink, says, *Whiskey*.

Whiskey, it’s not a joke, a nickname, but no joke. My best friend gave me that name the first time we broke into my parents’ liquor cabinet. She went for the schnapps that were sweet and pleasing, and I went for the Crown Royal. It was the bottle that drew me in. It was in a purple drawstring bag, which made it look expensive and like it was something important people drink. My father drank it and he was pretty important. Jackie cringed at the smell of it but it just made me want to taste it more. I poured it into a shot glass, and like a pro, I threw it back, enjoying the feel of its warmth as it slid down my throat and settled in my stomach. I didn’t even make the face you see when people on television drink the amber liquid from a crystal decanter—wimps. From that night on, Jackie called me Whiskey, and it just stuck. As I saw it, it wasn’t a name to be ashamed of. I even got it tattooed on the back of my neck after I turned eighteen, along with a crown on my wrist, to remind myself that I’m a whiskey drinking, take it straight, tough as nails bitch.

My real name is Morgan, but you’d only know that if you looked at my driver’s license. I never go by that name because I have always hated it. You can’t turn Morgan into something cute and I wasn’t named after anyone important, so there’s no legacy that came with it. Out of the gate, it just sounds like the name of someone who’s always in trouble, which I kind of always was, but my parents couldn’t have known that when I was born and bestowed the hideous name on me, or did they? Never the matter, they are the only people on earth that call me that name. To everyone else, I’m Whiskey.

Speaking of, they're starting to flood in now. I can hear their voices before I see who they are, but as soon as I see faces, I start getting their drinks ready. By the time they've all say their hellos and make their way over to me, I'm sliding glasses across the bar, and that, my friends, is one of the many reasons I'm an awesome bartender. Know your regulars and know what they drink. If you do that, there's no doubt that when they pay you, "*Keep the change,*" will follow, and in this business, that phrase is like music to my ears.

The core crowd, as I call them, starts coming in at eight, though karaoke doesn't start until nine. People are claiming tables and moving chairs to accommodate their party, and most importantly, making sure they drink enough liquid courage to follow through. Mitch, the KJ, aka karaoke DJ, shows up to set up the show, and some of the stars quickly crowd around him, getting their names in line and recklessly flirting to be a favorite for the night. It's really funny to watch middle-aged women strutting what they've got to be karaoke queen of the night. God, I love my job.

Mitch comes up to the bar to get his usual bucket of waters. I lean in close. "So who's queen of the stage tonight?"

He turns and looks at the queens in the running, then turns back to me. "Done them all, but wouldn't mind seconds."

"You're a fucking pig! Get off my bar!"

He just laughs.

"I mean it. Go away, man whore!" I yell as he steps away.

Now there's a dick I'd never touch. It's been in nearly every hole in this bar, including the glory hole. But never in mine, though it's not for lack of trying. He's a nice guy and he'd have my back in an instant, but sex with him would be like buying underwear from a Goodwill store. Just—no.

Mitch starts his show and the place is packed. Old faces, new faces, young people, old people. I never knew how popular this scene was until I started here. Of course, here was the first place I have ever worked. I moved to Las Vegas from Portland, and was fresh out of bartending school. Some don't see the logic in that, but it's simple. I hated it in Portland and finally got to a point in my life when I was done making decisions to make other people happy and I didn't have to stay. Las Vegas was somewhere I'd always wanted to go and one day I made a snap decision. I packed up my car and I left. I drove two days, living on coffee and my radio volume turned up to fifty. And no matter how poor I've been or what I had to give up since then, I've never regretted a moment.

I sing along with the singers on stage as I sling bottles and pour shots, never missing a beat with either, until I feel a pair of eyes on me and turn to see him. He must have snuck in while I was busy, taking his usual seat at the end of the bar. This is the third night he's been here, always just appearing out of nowhere. He's never waiting for anyone; he shows up alone and leaves alone, and I've never seen him before that first night. I'd definitely remember if I did. You just don't see a face, or a body like his, and forget.

I move to the end of the bar and grab a napkin to place in front of him. "Whatcha drinking tonight, stranger?" He makes eye contact with me and it's like I'm held captive in those brown orbs. Never before have I seen eyes the color of molten chocolate and caramel and I can't help but lick my lips.

"A shot of Crown."

I knew that's what he would order; it's what he's ordered every night. Little does he know he's a man after my own fucking heart.

“You got it.” I grab a shot glass and set it on the counter. Normally, I’d show off my flare and flip the bottle into a perfect pour, but not with the Crown. It receives my full respect and pour perfection from bottle to glass. I pick it up and place it in front of him. “Meeting someone or drinking alone tonight?”

“I’m not meeting anyone and I won’t be drinking alone if you drink with me.” He just hit the mark and right now I might do anything he asks me to. Is it possible to have a mini orgasm from a beautiful man asking you to drink with him? And is it normal or wrong that I am completely willing to throw every ounce of respect I have for myself out the window to have one night of raw and animalistic passion with this man?

“Well, what kind of bartender would I be if I declined a request like that?” I grab another glass and fill it, then hold it up to him. “To what should we toast?”

He lifts his glass. “What’s your name?”

“Whiskey.”

He narrows his eyes at me in a challenge.

“Really—look at the sign.”

He looks around me to see my name on the whiteboard, then tips his head and meets my eyes. “Then we toast to whiskey, both the beauty and the drink.”

I feel the temperature in the room rising and I haven’t even taken my shot yet. “To whiskey.” Our glasses meet each other’s, and then we bring them up to our lips. Our eyes lock but our moment is broken when my name is yelled out from the other side of the room.

I turn to see who found it so important that they had to interrupt us and I see Jonas at the other end of the bar. Busted!

“I’ll be back,” I say, hoping that he’ll stay a while tonight and not just disappear.

“I’ll be here,” he says and I can’t stop the smile that takes over my face. Apparently, my poker face is out of order when it comes to him.

I turn and head over to where Jonas stands. “What’s up?” I feign innocence.

“I’m on my way out. Johnny’s here to close.”

“Okay, cool. I’ll see you Tuesday night then.”

His smile is tired as he waves and turns to leave, but then he turns back around. “Whiskey?”

“Yeah?”

“Take it easy on the shots.”

I know I am busted so I just give him the gun with my hand and wink, then wait for him to disappear. But when I turn to head back to where the beautiful whiskey drinking man with chocolate and caramel eyes was sitting, he’s gone.



I don't know how I can be so upset with a man I just met, but I am. I don't even know his name, but he said he would stay, that he'd be right there, and he's gone. I turn back to the rest of the bar. People all around me are talking, and suddenly, I feel like I don't know what I'm doing here. I have to shake it off and pull it together. I don't know him so there's no way I can miss him or anything about him. I read too many damn romance novels.

Then I hear this voice singing, one I've never heard before. I look up and it's him, and I melt. The lyrics of the song "Lady in Red" flow from his lips, and I'm as mesmerized as everyone else is in the bar.

His voice is smooth and pulls me in, making everyone else in the room disappear, and making me wish that we were living out the lyrics. He's looking at me, singing to me, and I'm melting with every word. When he sings the last note and the music comes to an end, the place erupts in applause, but I just stand there in awe.

"Let's hear it for first time singer, Austin!" Mitch says to the crowd.

Austin. A perfect name for a perfectly beautiful man who enjoys a good shot of whiskey and has a voice that can touch the deepest place within you. He steps down from the stage and saunters back to the end of the bar. I look over at him but have no words. What do you say after that? One of the other patrons gives me a minute to figure it out by asking for drinks, but my mind is not on mixing, and I'm thankful that I can literally make the drinks in my sleep. My thoughts, every single solitary one of them, are about this man, who has rendered me speechless.

I pick up bottles and make my pours, not at all lost on the fact that he's watching me the entire time. In most instances, I'd write it off as being the drunk stare some get after too much booze, but his is not a drunk stare. He's watching intently, appreciating and memorizing my every move, and I suspect projecting some sort of magnetic field that has me wanting to go back to him. I set down the drinks, collect the money, and move toward him.

"Can I get you anything else?" I ask, trying to look anywhere but into those eyes, which is impossible, and I fail.

"I'm good," he says while the corner of his mouth turns up in a mischievous grin.

Oh, what I wouldn't give to know what he's thinking. "You did a good job up there," I say, motioning to the stage that is now inhabited by three women singing a song by Sir Mix-A-Lot. "Are you new around here? I'm sure I'd remember that face of yours."

He tries to hide a smile by rubbing his hand over his mouth. "I'm visiting and just checking out the area. How about you? How long have you lived here? My guess is you're from a big city, somewhere exciting."

“You’re pretty good.” I nod my head as I grab the bottle of Crown and fill a fresh glass for him. “Portland born and raised. What about you? Where are you from?”

“Kansas City.”

“Wow! Well, Austin from Kansas City, you’re a long way from home. Running from the law?”

He smiles and shakes his head.

“Escaping a psychotic ex?”

Again, he shakes his head. “Just looking for a change of scenery.”

“And how’s that going for you? Are you finding what you’re looking for?” I ask, in no way expecting what I’m about to hear.

“I think I may have.” He holds up his glass, winks, and tips his head back, emptying the shot, and then bringing his eyes back to mine.

Damn, I don’t think I stand a chance here.

I look over to see one of my favorites take the stage, and as soon as I hear the music start, I yell out and start dancing and singing along.

Austin just sits there in that calm, cool, and collected way, observing everything. “Do you ever get up there?”

“Up there?” I point to the stage. “I’ve been known to if I have a couple of shots in me.”

“Then by all means, allow me to buy you another.”

I shake my head and laugh, then wave my finger at him and narrow my eyes in that knowing way. “You’re a special kind of trouble, aren’t ya, Austin from Kansas City? I should keep my eyes on you.”

“I’ve been accused of worse.”

*I’m sure you have. I’d like to accuse you of worse.*

“And yes, you probably should.” He winks.

I grab the bottle and refill his glass and pour another one for me, once again holding mine out to him. “To trouble from Kansas City.”

He holds his out and that wicked grin is back.

I fight back the desire to lean over the bar and kiss him. Everything inside me wants to be claimed by this man that I just met. It’s like a scene out of a paranormal romance when the girl just knows she has met her mate—it’s that instant. But the moment doesn’t last when someone yells my name from across the bar.

“Whiskey!” I turn to see Karla, one of the regulars, waving at me. “Are you going to sing tonight?”

“I don’t know, I’m pretty busy, babe,” I yell back.

But Karla is in her prime for the night and will not let me off that easy. “Bullshit!” she yells back, and then proceeds to hoist herself up and onto her chair, giving one of those two-finger whistles to get everyone’s attention. “Who here wants to hear Whiskey sing tonight?”

The whole bar goes up in a roar of hoots, whistles, and applause, causing me to turn seven shades of red. Any other night I wouldn’t care but there’s a set of eyes on me that I can feel above the others.

“See? Give the crowd what the crowd wants!”

Remind me to cut her off after this.

Karla proceeds to lead the bar in chanting my name. “Whiskey! Whiskey! Whiskey!”

“Okay, okay! I’ll do it!” I throw my hands up in surrender and another roar breaks out. I’d never win anyway—the drunk-to-sober ratio is just too high and overpowering.

I throw down my towel and walk from behind the bar and up to the small stage. I can't lie, I love the way it feels up here. Years of choir had me believing that one day singing on a stage would be my life, but I didn't have the drive. I also didn't want every moment of my life planned for me. I prefer to be a free spirit. The big stars have money but they're puppets, always allowing someone else to dictate what they do and how they act.

I lean into Mitch to tell him what I'm going to sing and wait while he cues the track. Once the music starts, a few claps can be heard around the room and I take one last glance at Austin before I sing the first lyrics. I'd like to blame it on the shots, but I picked this song for a reason and I'll really be surprised if I go home alone tonight.

His eyes never leave mine as the seductive words of "*What Would Happen*" leave my lips, and I know that every word I'm singing has a meaning that is mutual. I—we—won't make it through this night without answering every question asked in the song I chose.

When my song is over, I return to the bar and walk over to the end where Austin sits. I refuse to blush while his eyes, that look hungrier with every moment that goes by, are completely focused on me.

"What time do you get off work?" he asks. It's a question driven by desire.

"Two, give or take."

"Can I ask you another question?"

"Yes."

"Was that song for me?"

I don't know how to answer his question. If I say no, I'm afraid he'll see right through me. If I say yes, what will I be getting myself into? "Austin from Kansas City ..." I shake my head and then bring my eyes to his.

"Just Austin," he cuts in, and the look on his face, in his eyes, threatens to take me to my knees.

My body is tingling with arousal and I struggle to get myself together for the sake of speaking. "Austin, if you had to ask, maybe it wasn't."

He nods and looks down at his empty glass. Not that I want to, in fact it kills me to, but I walk away. I don't make it ten steps away before he stops me. "Whiskey?"

I turn back and look at him.

"I didn't have to ask."

"Then why did you?"

"I wanted to hear you say it."

I walk back over to him and lean in until only inches separate us and I can smell all that is him. "Can I tell you a secret, Austin?"

He moves in closer, almost close enough to smell the whiskey on his breath, close enough that just a little bit farther and I could touch him.

"In that case, it totally was."

I quickly back off and tend to my other customers, leaving him there to ponder my words. He wanted to know—now he does. Eventually the room starts to thin, most having left because they were partied out, in other words, they were hammered, and others because they just possess the discipline to quit. But Austin stays seated at the end of the bar and I can feel him watching me.

Finally, my shift is done. I take my tips from the jar and shove them into my bag. I grab the bottle and walk over to him. Without a word, I fill some glasses for us one last time. I know

what I want to happen, and it is very unlike me to be so reckless, but maybe being reckless is okay every once in a while. I left home to escape a life of doing what was expected. “One for the road?”

He nods and picks it up, throwing it back before rising from his stool and walking around the bar to meet me at the end. There’s an intensity between us that can’t be mistaken for anything less than pure sexual attraction and my body is already aching for his touch.

“Good night!” I yell to Johnny, the closing manager, as I step out the door.

Not a second after I hear the click of the lock, Austin pushes me back against the wall and crashes his lips to mine. Any passerby might think that he’s attacking me, but the truth is I’ve been waiting for this all night long. His tongue slips past my lips and the taste of the last shot he took still lingers there. He kisses me long and hard, satisfying a need that’s been hanging in the air for hours.

He breaks from my lips and moves to my neck. His warm lips on my skin, sending volts of pleasure through me and making the ache inside me become painful.

“Where’s your car?” I ask, ignoring the fact that neither of us should probably drive.

He looks at me with a fire in his eyes that threatens to set me ablaze. “I’m staying with a friend a couple of blocks over—I walked here.”

I start laughing almost uncontrollably and he looks at me questioningly. “Come on, stranger, who wants a change of scenery, I know just the place.” I grab his hand and drag him along until we stop at my Jeep. “You hungry?” I ask innocently, but his eyes answer the question with everything but innocence. I shake my head but give him a smirk so that he knows I hunger for the same thing, but it’ll have to wait. Right now, I want real food. I hop in the Jeep and then yell out the top, “Well, are you getting in or what? Time’s a-wastin’!”

Did I cut this party short?

Whiskey is available

On Amazon & available on KU

with these live links!

US <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0793LS7JT>

UK <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0793LS7JT>